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Chair

The Honourable Larry Bagnell

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● (1100)

[English]

The Chair (Hon. Larry Bagnell (Yukon, Lib.)): Good morning, everyone. Welcome back after constituency week. Welcome to the 142nd meeting of the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs. This meeting is being televised.

Our first order of business today is the consideration of the votes of the interim estimates 2019-20 for the House of Commons and the Parliamentary Protective Service.

We are pleased to be joined by the Honourable Geoff Regan, Speaker of the House of Commons. Accompanying the Speaker from the House of Commons are Charles Robert, Clerk of the House; Michel Patrice, deputy clerk, administration; and Daniel Paquette, chief financial officer.

Also, from the Parliamentary Protective Service, we welcome Superintendent Marie-Claude Côté, interim director; and Robert Graham, administration and personnel officer.

Thank you all for being here. I will now turn the floor over to you, Mr. Speaker, for your opening statement.

Hon. Geoff Regan (Speaker of the House of Commons): Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman and committee members. Thank you for welcoming us here today.

[Translation]

I am pleased to be here to present the 2019-20 interim estimates and to address the funding required to maintain and enhance the House Administration's support to members of Parliament and the institution.

I am joined today by members of the House Administration's executive management team, who you know well: Charles Robert, clerk of the House of Commons; Michel Patrice, deputy clerk, Administration; and Daniel Paquette, chief financial officer.

I will also be presenting the interim estimates for the Parliamentary Protective Service. Therefore, I am also accompanied by Marie-Claude Côté, acting director of PPS, and Robert Graham, the service's Administration and Personnel Officer.

[English]

The interim estimates for 2019-20 include an overview of spending requirements for the first three months of the fiscal year, with a comparison to the 2018-19 estimates, as well as the proposed schedules for the first appropriation bill.

The interim estimates of the House of Commons, as tabled in the House, total approximately \$87.5 million and represent three-twelfths of the total voted authorities that will be included in the upcoming 2019-20 main estimates. Once the main estimates are tabled in the House, I anticipate that we will meet again in the spring, at which time I will provide an overview of the year-over-year changes.

Today, I'll give you a brief overview of the House of Commons' main priorities.

Ensuring that members and House officers have the services and resources to meet their needs is essential in supporting them in the fulfillment of their parliamentary functions.

By the way, Mr. Chairman, I will of course try to speak at a rate where it's possible for the interpreters to interpret, because we all appreciate the wonderful work they do, and I don't wish to make it more difficult.

● (1105)

[Translation]

The House Administration's top priority is to support members in their work as parliamentarians by focusing on service-delivery excellence and ongoing modernization. As an example, this past year, we have seen the opening of four multidisciplinary Source *plus* service centres, which are ready to provide members and their staff with in-person support.

A team of House of Commons employees is available to provide assistance related to finance, human resources, information technology and various operational services offered by the House Administration. If members ever have any comments about this, I would be very interested in hearing them.

Another service-delivery initiative has been the implementation of a standardized approach for computer and printing equipment in constituency offices across the country. This initiative was launched as a pilot project this year. Its purpose is threefold: to ensure parity between Hill and constituency computing services; to enhance IT support and security; and to simplify purchasing and life-cycling of equipment in the constituency offices.

In addition, all constituency offices will now be provided with a complete set of standard computer devices and applications following the next general election.

[English]

The House administration aims to provide innovative, effective, accountable and non-partisan support to members. To do so, it must attract and retain an engaged, qualified and productive workforce that acts responsibly and with integrity.

Cost-of-living increases are essential to recruitment efforts for members, House officers and the House administration as employers, and funding for these increases is accounted for in the estimates.

Members will know that employee support programs are also a priority. These programs, which are offered to employees of members, House officers, research offices and the administration, include an employee and family assistance program and other resources and events, such as those taking place this February for Wellness Month.

The renewal of our physical spaces and the services provided within them is another priority for the House administration.

The opening of West Block and the visitor welcome centre is the most significant change to date to the parliamentary precinct. We believe that West Block is a model to other parliaments tackling similar challenges with respect to aging facilities. In fact, I know many of you are aware that, at Westminster, they're planning to move out and have a major renovation to the Palace of Westminster, which of course is an immense undertaking. That will be a few years away still.

The House of Commons works closely with its parliamentary partners and with Public Services and Procurement Canada in support of the long-term vision and plan.

For the coming years, the focus will be on decommissioning and restoring Centre Block. We will also continue to review and update the House of Commons' requirements and guiding principles for future renovations to the parliamentary precinct. The administration of the House of Commons will continue to look at ways to best engage members in the Centre Block project moving forward and to ensure they continue to be part of discussions on the design and operational requirements for that building.

An ongoing priority is the operation, support, maintenance and life-cycle management of equipment and connectivity elements in all buildings. This work is essential to providing a mobile work environment for members and the administration, which is something that we all, of course, now expect.

[Translation]

I now turn to the interim estimates for the Parliamentary Protective Service. The Parliamentary Protective Service is requesting access to \$28 million in these interim estimates.

The funding requirements align with the four key strategic priorities of the service: protective operational excellence; engaged and healthy employees; balanced security and access; and sound stewardship.

The majority of the PPS annual budget is attributed to its first priority, protective operational excellence, which includes personnel salaries and overtime costs.

In keeping with the service's aim to allocate existing resources as judiciously as possible, several posts were added to the overall security posture in response to the opening of the interim accommodations. I would suggest that, if members have any questions with respect to the security posture, the committee may wish to go in camera for that exchange.

• (1110)

[English]

The service recently reclassified the positions of all protection officers, which led to an increase in their salaries retroactive to April 1, 2018.

PPS has also successfully reached a bargaining agreement with the Senate Protective Service Employees Association and an extension of the previous agreement with the Public Service Alliance of Canada. For this reason, funding has been earmarked to make payments for retroactive economic increases as a result of these negotiations.

As PPS evolves, the service is gradually reducing the presence of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police in certain areas on Parliament Hill and within the parliamentary precinct and, in turn, increasing the resources and presence of PPS officers.

The remainder of the PPS budget ensures that the administration, which supports the operations of the service, is adequately equipped and resourced. This means ensuring that security assets and technology are properly managed and that employees are continuously supported in their health and well-being. As PPS approaches its fourth anniversary this June, its administration is becoming more agile and responsive to the needs of Parliament and of its own workforce.

[Translation]

Mr. Chair, this concludes my overview of the 2019-20 interim estimates for the House of Commons and Parliamentary Protective Service.

My officials and I would be pleased to answer any questions from members.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Graham, you may go ahead.

[English]

Mr. David de Burgh Graham (Laurentides—Labelle, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, every time you come here, you apologize for the speed at which you speak, and I keep looking around and feeling all these eyes looking at me.

[Translation]

Ms. Côté, you are the fourth interim director of the PPS since it was established. There have been many conflicts with the unions, all of which were based on an application to the Labour Relations and Employment Board, a response to which is still outstanding.

Do you have a new vision that could bring peace to the PPS?

Superintendent Marie-Claude Côté (Interim Director, Parliamentary Protective Service): Thank you for your question.

I would first like to thank the chair
[English]

for welcoming me today to my first committee appearance, and also the Speaker for his support.

My vision is the same as my predecessor's. We always want to work in harmony with our employees. That is what my goal will be as the interim director.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: As you probably have seen in the last few years, my primary concern is that when PPS was created after the October 22 shooting, it brought in an element of the security reporting to the executive branch. There's an element of that. By virtue of being an RCMP officer under the definition of the RCMP Act, you report by necessity to the commissioner. For me, that is a long-term concern in terms of protecting the democracy of this country.

Here's what I'd like to know, from both the Speaker and PPS. Is there a long-term desire to keep the RCMP directly involved on the Hill in this capacity? Is that the objective in the long term, or would you like to see a different approach?

Supt Marie-Claude Côté: According to the legislation, I report to the Speaker; however, when it comes to operations, I report to the commissioner of the RCMP. That's, of course, how it has been done. In terms of changing anything like that, it's not for me to change the legislation.

Hon. Geoff Regan: It's a matter for Parliament to determine how that should operate. Obviously, as the Speaker, I will live—quite happily, of course—with whatever Parliament decides in that regard.

• (1115)

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: That's fair.

Do you find that you have the authority you need over PPS in your capacity as Speaker?

Hon. Geoff Regan: I would say that I find that, when I raise concerns with PPS, I get swift action, and that they work hard to try to make any improvement that members feel is necessary. I haven't felt a problem with that. I appreciate very much the co-operation of the superintendent, as well as her predecessor, who is now, of course, head of the RCMP in Manitoba, for which we congratulate her.

As I say, I don't think it's appropriate for me to comment on what Parliament ought to decide in terms of legislation. If Parliament decides to pass new legislation—if a future or current government decides to bring in legislation to change the act so that the PPS is not headed by a member of the RCMP—that's a matter for Parliament, and I don't think it's appropriate for me to comment on something like that.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: That's fair.

You mentioned in your opening remarks that you would invite us to go in camera at some point to discuss some operational matters. With the consent of my colleagues, I'd like to do that later on in the questioning. There are some questions I'd like to ask that are more

appropriate in that vein. In the interim, I do have a couple more for you.

Ms. Côté, I've suggested to your predecessor in the past that RCMP units that are assigned to PPS, division 4, support some form of identification to show that they are PPS, to help with the force cohesion. I know that's difficult with the RCMP uniform, but are there any efforts to look at possibilities of adding the PPS insignia or a PPS unit pin of some sort to show that the RCMP officers assigned to the Hill are part of PPS?

Supt Marie-Claude Côté: That could be a possibility. It's not something we are looking at right now, because they're still employed by the RCMP, so this is why we have two different uniforms. The easiest way to see it is as a contract—we're being contracted to work on the Hill—so it could be a possibility.

Hon. Geoff Regan: You will recall that one of us said that we have seen already and will continue to see a reduction in the number of RCMP personnel on the Hill, and therefore people will be replaced by members of PPS.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: My privilege concern on that one is that there are any members of the RCMP, who necessarily report to the commissioner. That goes to the minister, which is a separate type of—

Hon. Geoff Regan: I understand your concern.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: I have one last question on PPS, before I go on to discuss this beautiful new building we're in. The PPS budget is about \$90 million a year, about 20% of the entire House budget, as compared to Gatineau, in which police and fire together are about \$109 million for the entire kit.

How does this compare to what it cost prior to amalgamation? Are we getting our money's worth from it, just very directly?

Supt Marie-Claude Côté: We use our resources effectively, and we use different strategies to ensure that we optimize them and that we deploy them to always ensure that the House can go on with its business and that we also do our protective mandate so that everybody feels safe.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: In the last few seconds I have.... Have we had any difficulties with establishing security in this new building, while still having officers assigned to Centre Block, for example? We expanded fairly quickly the footprint that we need to cover.

Supt Marie-Claude Côté: On that, we made the request for the main estimates in order to be able to accommodate the new buildings. We're pleased with what we have right now, and we utilize those resources as we need—

Hon. Geoff Regan: As I understand it, there is less requirement for security in Centre Block because members of Parliament and visitors to Parliament Hill and employees aren't over there. It's primarily going to be Public Services and Procurement Canada employees and the contractors who are there, so it's not the same requirement, although after the small leak we had, as you may recall, the cabinet was meeting there for a period of time, so that required some personnel there during that relatively short period.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Reid.

• (1120)

Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Kingston, CPC): It is appropriate under the circumstances to differentiate between the small leak and the large leak that's on everybody's mind, so I appreciate that point of distinction.

I had a series of questions, which I gave to you, Mr. Speaker, but just before I start going down that road I wanted to say that I thought Mr. Graham had a thoughtful comment with regard to the idea of separate insignia. With regard to contracting, of course the RCMP contracts with the provinces all the time, so I suspect there are some useful precedents we can look at that are at least partly relevant.

My questions are about the upcoming changes to Centre Block—which will presumably extend beyond the careers of most of the people in this room today—and how we can ensure ongoing oversight. I was hoping, Mr. Speaker, that I could ask you to give us a little bit of information about your role in that and about what you think our role should be.

The first question I had was this. Can you describe your role and the role of the Board of Internal Economy up to this point with regard to the governance and oversight of the parliamentary precinct renovations for West Block and projecting forward to those that will take place for Centre Block?

Hon. Geoff Regan: Thank you very much.

First, I want to tell you basically how it works. Integrated multi-level governance has been established within the administration of Public Services and Procurement Canada and the parliamentary partners—us, and of course the Senate—to oversee the project. The Minister of Public Services and Procurement Canada is the official custodian of the parliamentary precinct buildings and grounds. Think of PSPC as the landlord, and we're the tenants.

In fact, the House of Commons will turn over or relinquish control of Centre Block to PSPC officially in a few months. They're already there working. We are still extracting some things that we require from that building to store or renovate, whatever. I think I've had good co-operation so far in terms of being able to express my views and ensure that the views of members are heard in relation to the renovation that will take place.

However, as I've stated before here, I think it's incumbent upon us as members, and in particular on this committee I would say, to continue to insist on being part of that process. I have not had any indication that there isn't a willingness and desire from PSPC or from the architects involved in the renewal to ensure that our concerns are heard and recognized in what is done over at Centre Block. There are architects in the House of Commons administration who are also involved and will continue to be involved. I am pleased there is this process, which I described at the beginning, of a joint management of that, involving the House of Commons administration and the Senate.

As I said, I think it's vital that we continue to insist on that, and that we insist on things like access for the media to members of Parliament, as they've had in the past in Centre Block, and access, of course, for the public as much as possible. We're all aware of the need to have protection, but also the need to have maximum access

possible for members of the public, because we want this to continue to be a democracy.

Mr. Scott Reid: Thank you.

I concur with your feelings about there being no desire to keep us out of the oversight capacity, nor would there logically be at this stage of the process of renovating Centre Block. We're early into that, so nobody's had the opportunity yet to make mistakes that they hope nobody will notice.

Here's a question. When funds are required for parliamentary precinct renovations, including for the remediation of such problems as will arise, to the best of your knowledge, does the spending authority come through the main and supplementary estimates for the House of Commons, or does it go through Public Services and Procurement Canada or some other process? Do they flow through you or the Board of Internal Economy?

Mr. Michel Patrice (Deputy Clerk, Administration): To answer your question, I would say it would come from both sources, Public Services and Procurement and also from the House of Commons main estimates.

In terms of the House of Commons main estimates, a lot of it would be about staff, in terms of assisting or helping, and also about replacing certain pieces of equipment. But mainly it would be from procurement services.

Mr. Scott Reid: Which committee does that mean? Do you know?

Mr. Michel Patrice: I mean from the Public Works—

• (1125)

Hon. Geoff Regan: That's the primary place. Therefore, I presume it would go through the main and supplementary estimates of the department, as opposed to the House.

Our involvement, once we hand it over... At some point, there will be requirements for us to deal with things like equipment, as Michel mentioned, but the renovation and reconstruction of the place is of course primarily up to the department.

Mr. Scott Reid: Right.

Do you sit on any non-parliamentary advisory groups related to the parliamentary precinct renovations?

Hon. Geoff Regan: I don't, personally.

Michel, how does that work?

Mr. Michel Patrice: There's no such group that exists at the present time, so the Speaker obviously doesn't sit on any such group.

Mr. Scott Reid: Okay.

Mr. Michel Patrice: Obviously, it's intended that we're going to have a discussion with the board later this week in terms of the governance and oversight that members of Parliament must and should have in terms of the Centre Block requirements.

Mr. Scott Reid: There was a parliamentary precinct oversight advisory committee that obviously was not a formal part of the funding approval process, but it did exist. It was established in 2001, and it was chaired by former speaker John Fraser. Does that still exist, as far as you know?

Mr. Michel Patrice: It doesn't exist anymore. I believe, at that time, that group was reporting to the Minister of Public Works.

Mr. Scott Reid: Are you aware of any successor that reports to the minister?

Mr. Michel Patrice: No. There is none at this moment. In terms of a going-forward process, we are having discussions with Public Works to ensure that members of Parliament, the board and committees such as this one can have meaningful input on the requirements.

Mr. Scott Reid: I have just a few seconds left.

Do you have any idea when you would be getting back to us with suggestions as to what that process might look like?

Mr. Michel Patrice: It will be as soon as possible. As I said, we're going to start that discussion with the Board of Internal Economy, which has the main oversight, I would suggest, in terms of the requirements and the needs of the House and its members.

Hon. Geoff Regan: The board meets Thursday.

Mr. Scott Reid: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Mr. Christopherson.

Mr. David Christopherson (Hamilton Centre, NDP): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you for being here, Mr. Speaker, as well as the Clerk and everyone else.

I'd like to pick up where Mr. Reid was. I know, Mr. Speaker, that you're aware of the reaction to this committee when it came forward, when we had reflected on West Block and felt there was a real absence of individual MPs collectively having a say. I understand you're going to talk to the Board of Internal Economy.

My question is for you, Mr. Speaker—and I'm not holding you to anything; it's just off the top of your head. We've talked about this a little bit. We've just begun the process of saying we need to be more involved, and we're now talking about how we can do that.

I'm not aware of a formal mechanism per se between us and/or you and/or BOIE. We could create something ad hoc—there's nothing to stop us from communicating with each other—but Chair, it's my understanding that we don't have any formal process per se.

What are your thoughts, Mr. Speaker, as we go through this? Do you have any advice, concerns or ideas that you'd like to leave with us as we do our part of it? I'm looking more at process. How do you see us playing that useful role in a meaningful way without being both irrelevant and too big a problem?

It is a tall order, but just give your thoughts, sir.

Hon. Geoff Regan: Mr. Christopherson, I don't see you as a big problem. I want to assure you.

Mr. David Christopherson: You say that as I'm leaving.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Hon. Geoff Regan: I appreciate your interest on issues like this.

Obviously, you know that the committee is a master of its own affairs and can examine the things it wants to examine. I would hope that on an ongoing basis, this committee will pursue this topic and

will not only, of course, have visits from me as Speaker—or Speakers and administrations in the future—to discuss this, but that you might also want to call folks from Public Services and Procurement to talk about the renovation at Centre Block and how it's going, and to make sure that the concerns of MPs are being heard.

So far, I have found that when, in the process, I have raised issues with the architects and others, from both the House and PSPC, they have been very attentive and anxious to hear what the concerns of MPs are, to understand how the building operates. When John Pearson and Jean-Omer Marchand designed the building, back in 1916, and over the ensuing period, they clearly sought to understand how Parliament worked, how members of Parliament operated, what they needed to do their jobs well, the access that was needed for the public, etc. They didn't have the security concerns that we have today, but they were anxious to do all those things. And I'm impressed that the architects seem to be concerned about all those things.

While I expect the Board of Internal Economy will seek some type of formal mechanism on an ongoing basis, I think this committee might have a less formal, but continuing, interest in this matter, making sure that it has witnesses to talk about this on an ongoing basis and that it is able to express its concerns.

• (1130)

Mr. David Christopherson: I liked it all, except the end part. You were watering down our role there. I'm not keen on that.

Hon. Geoff Regan: Well, you know, if you want to take a formal role, go ahead.

Mr. David Christopherson: If I might change gears, I have some questions too about PPS, which won't come as a surprise. This is my last kick at the cat. After this, I won't be here when this comes up again. I just want to emphasize that I do hope that Mr. Graham and others grab onto this issue and refuse to let go. It is absolutely unacceptable that the guns in Parliament are controlled by the Prime Minister, by the executive branch. That's the structure right now, and it's wrong. It needs to change. I suspect, based on being around here for a while, that it's really not going to happen until there's a minority and somebody puts it on an agenda and says, "You want a deal? Then we go back and do things the right way."

It breaks my heart to leave here, having spent time on the security committee at Queen's Park, having been a solicitor general, and having been a parliamentarian now for far too long, and then to see this kind of aberration and abuse of the parliamentary system. I say this as the House just voted to deny a member from having their say, based on politics, not on the reality, in my humble opinion. Too many times Parliament is allowing the continuing immigration of power from Parliament to the executive, and it's a struggle to get it back.

That's my last rant on that, and I just hope that in the future it does get changed.

I have one last question, if I may. I'm short on time. I'm just curious on this one; it's just me. I'm curious to know how the Black Rod process is going to work now. Is she or he actually going to have to march all that way, or will it be set up in here as if they had? I'm just curious, being an avid parliamentarian.

Hon. Geoff Regan: First of all, let me indicate my appreciation for your insistence that members of Parliament continue to insist on the notion that Parliament, and not the executive, is paramount, and that the executive reports to Parliament, not the other way around. As you can imagine, in my role, I consider that fundamentally important.

Mr. David Christopherson: You do a good job of emphasizing that, too, and I've seen you do it internationally.

Hon. Geoff Regan: Thank you very much.

Mr. Clerk.

Mr. Charles Robert (Clerk of the House of Commons): Actually, we had a dry run to experiment with the process, and within 20 minutes we were able to bring the Black Rod to the House of Commons and send over to the Senate the contingent from the House that would be part of a royal assent ceremony. We presume that process would be followed for the Speech from the Throne, although we would expect that there would be higher participation on the part of the members.

Mr. David Christopherson: Touché.

Thanks, Chair.

The Chair: Thank you.

Considering the Board of Internal Economy is going to discuss this soon, and each party here has members on that board, you might want to speak to your member on the board as to what your feelings are.

Now we'll go on to Mr. Bittle, who's sharing his time with Ms. Sahota, I think.

Mr. Chris Bittle (St. Catharines, Lib.): Thanks so much.

I have only one topic I'd like to bring up. Mr. Speaker, perhaps this isn't a fair question to you, but you mentioned the constituency office IT pilot. Our office was selected—lucky us—

Ms. Linda Lapointe (Rivière-des-Mille-Îles, Lib.): Me too....

Mr. Chris Bittle: —as was Madam Lapointe's. I understand a standardization of services, but MPs' offices aren't necessarily standardized. For example, one service that my office provides is a low-income tax clinic, and we require software from the Canada Revenue Agency to operate that tax clinic. We were initially told, "No, you can't have that." To my mind, having that is fundamental to what I do and what my office does. We do about 2,000 tax returns a year, so eliminating that service....

The suggestion from IT was to have a second set of computers, which I don't think anyone who came into our office would find acceptable. We received a laptop to try this software. It didn't work, and we sent it back. If this is the case for Government of Canada software—that it cannot be used in the pilot program—I'm worried about what other MPs are going to do with other pieces of software that they deem necessary for the operation of their office.

• (1135)

Hon. Geoff Regan: You're using Government of Canada software, I presume, that any member can use in their constituency office, provided they can put it on the computer, which IT is saying you can't do.

Mr. Chris Bittle: They're unable to do it at this point, yes.

Hon. Geoff Regan: I bet they're working on it, but I'm delighted that the head of IT, Stéphan Aubé, is here, because I can see he's dying to give you an explanation.

Mr. Chris Bittle: Thank you.

Mr. Stéphan Aubé (Chief Information Officer, House of Commons): I'm sorry to disappoint you, Mr. Speaker.

I wasn't aware of the issue, Mr. Bittle. We will take note of it.

Just to clarify, we wouldn't want you to use another set of computers. We feel that you can use the House computers. That being said, the question for us is, will that computer be connected to the House infrastructure? For security reasons, we'll have to determine that, but we shouldn't have any issues in allowing you to use that software on one of the pieces from the House without your having to buy a second PC.

I'll take note of that, and I'll have someone in my group get back to you today, sir. If that's also the case for Madam Lapointe, I'll be proactive in my answer.

Ms. Linda Lapointe: As you know, in Quebec we have two taxes on income, so we don't do that.

Hon. Geoff Regan: I don't know if Mr. Christopherson would want to have Government of Canada software—

Voices: Oh, oh!

Hon. Geoff Regan: —with House of Commons.... I mean, you know.

Mr. Chris Bittle: Thank you.

Ms. Ruby Sahota (Brampton North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, this morning you gave your decision about the incident of racial profiling that occurred on February 4 in one of our parliamentary precinct buildings. As you're aware, there were Black History Month celebrations going on that week, and we had a whole bunch of young people—because that was the theme of Black History Month on the Hill this year—advocating and lobbying different MPs and ministers. It was called Black Voices on the Hill. I understand that the incident was deemed not to be a point of privilege because it did not happen to a member, but you did mention that it was one that you take very seriously and one of great concern.

I was wondering if you could shed a little light as to what you discovered when you looked into the matter and how we can prevent this from happening, because we absolutely want to make sure that these young people feel that this is their place and they do belong here. It's definitely quite an upsetting incident for all who heard about this. We want to make sure that they do feel boundless, and with this incident having occurred, I think they must be feeling quite the opposite right now.

Could you give me some information on that?

Hon. Geoff Regan: First of all, I would have to say that I would refer you to my ruling. That's the encapsulation of what I'm saying on this topic.

As you understand, of course, the question of what is and what isn't a question of privilege is pretty clear. Strictly speaking, I suppose you could say that there is no way to raise this issue under a point of order or question of privilege, because it's not about the rules and the procedure of the House or an impact upon a member's ability to do the job in the House and so forth. I think, and hope, that everyone would agree, however, that it's an important matter and that it's important that it be dealt with and responded to. That's what I've attempted to do.

I'm going to ask Madam Superintendent to respond concerning the issue.

Supt Marie-Claude Côté: Thank you.

I'm truly sorry for what happened. We apologize for what was experienced. Upon learning of the incident, I asked for an immediate investigation and I gave the report of my investigation to the Speaker.

My expectation is for all of my employees to be respectful and professional, and we are looking at how we can improve to ensure that such an incident does not reoccur.

• (1140)

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Okay.

Were any measures taken to contact the young people who experienced this incident on the Hill?

Supt Marie-Claude Côté: We apologized publicly about this incident in the media.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: But not personally to them...?

Supt Marie-Claude Côté: When we receive complaints, we contact the complainants. The complaint we received was from a senator. We went back to the senator with the report and the information, and we're continuing to have discussions.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Did you find through your investigation that any kind of incorrect protocol was used in this circumstance, or is a change in protocol needed?

Supt Marie-Claude Côté: For me, the constable was asked to perform a duty. It was more than just the constable who was involved. I look after my employees, so I'm addressing the PPS employees only.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Well, we hope it doesn't occur again.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Sahota.

Now we go to Mr. Reid.

Mr. Scott Reid: Thank you.

I want to be respectful here and supportive of the time necessary to allow us to go in camera to deal with the matter that Mr. Graham wanted to raise.

The Chair: Okay.

Mr. Scott Reid: I gave a series of questions to the Speaker at the beginning of the meeting. The next question on my list has already been partly answered, so I will go through it and then make a meta-question out of it to allow him to answer it.

On December 11, 2018, we met with officials dealing with the Centre Block rehabilitation. They indicated that a consultation process with parliamentarians would be created. I had three subsidiary questions coming from that.

Number one is, would that be coming via the Board of Internal Economy? The answer I think I got was yes, but you can correct me if I've misunderstood it.

The second subsidiary question was, are you able to tell us anything about when this process might be proposed? To this I think the answer was "soon", but it was rather an uncertain soon.

Hon. Geoff Regan: It's on Thursday.

Mr. Scott Reid: Thursday? Thursday is very soon.

Okay. That is very precise.

Hon. Geoff Regan: It will be at the board.

Mr. Scott Reid: Then, to what extent will MPs have input into the structure of these changes before they go forward? Is it purely going to be via the Board of Internal Economy—I'm now looking post-Thursday, obviously—or are there other mechanisms by means of which MPs will have a say in the initial configuration of the ongoing consultations that presumably would last for a decade or more, as we try to implement all the different things we would collectively like to see implemented in this renovation?

Hon. Geoff Regan: It seems to me that this may be pre-empting—or not pre-empting, but.... You know that the board will make a decision, and I'm not going to prejudge what decision it will make on Thursday. Between now and Thursday, I think members should be encouraged to express their views to the members from their party who sit on the Board of Internal Economy. Of course, they can express their views to other members of the board as well. The board will decide how to do this, but your comments would, I imagine, be taken into account by the board in that deliberation, so keep it up.

Mr. Scott Reid: A recent media report stated that changes to the initial plans for the West Block renovation, which I think also encompasses the visitor welcome centre, generated over 100,000 pages of communications "regarding deficiencies in construction, engineering, design and architecture at Parliament's West Block and the new Senate chamber." That is a lot of material.

When construction problems of that nature are identified—I'm looking to the past now, but as a model for the future—to whom would that information have gone? I'm thinking in terms of people who are actually members of Parliament. Would that material have gone to members of the Board of Internal Economy? Would any of you know the answer to that question?

Mr. Michel Patrice: I haven't seen that information, so I cannot answer that question. I cannot say that any members of the board or the administration were aware of those 100 pages of communications.

Mr. Scott Reid: That was 100,000.

Mr. Michel Patrice: A hundred thousand pages.... I certainly haven't seen it.

In terms of construction problems, I'm going to state the obvious. There are some that have occurred—for example, the south and west doors of this building. As far as I'm concerned, there have been construction deficiencies. Those doors have not been working properly since the building was operationalized. The south door has been fixed and replaced, but we're still having issues with the west door. I understand that it's going to be fixed this weekend. We had to take some interim measures to make it accessible to members this week, for example.

• (1145)

Hon. Geoff Regan: Mr. Reid, you're talking about the whole time West Block was being renovated, aren't you?

Mr. Scott Reid: This is my way of opening up the point that there are many, many detailed documents that emerge, and there are many changes and compromises that have to be made as one goes forward. It is in the nature of the process. I would be surprised if Centre Block generates less than 100,000 pages. I suspect it will be a good deal more, and it's not because of anybody doing anything wrong. It's the nature of this kind of complex, multi-stage, multi-year process that involves many players.

Looking forward, the real question is how we can ensure that we have maximum openness to these problems as they arise. We need to be able to deal in a business-like manner with these issues: number one, how much the various compromises are going to cost; number two, what will have to be sacrificed when we make a compromise, and whether we are willing to give up on some feature we wanted; and finally, how it will affect the timing of our return.

Mr. Speaker, rather than pursue the details of how it was done in the past, maybe I could just ask if you have any thoughts on the best way to deal with this. I recognize that you and I are likely to be out playing golf in our retirement by the time this is done.

Hon. Geoff Regan: We can look forward to that. You'll probably beat me, but I can look forward to one of those games someday.

It seems to me that it will be important that the board create a process whereby input is ongoing, those discussions can take place and members can have input to that process. How exactly it's going to unfold remains to be seen, but I appreciate your thoughtfulness and the concern you express about this. You are concerned that this be done in a responsible way, and I think you're right. Undoubtedly, decisions that we make may require compromises from time to time. However, it's up to us as members—whether we are representatives of the Board of Internal Economy, of this committee or generally—to make sure that our concerns are heard and that our desire to ensure that the public is served properly and Parliament functions the way it ought to is understood.

Mr. Scott Reid: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker and all of you.

The Chair: Mr. Graham, you have time for a quick question, and then we'll go in camera.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: I just want to follow up on Mr. Bittle's question for Mr. Aubé on the technology in our offices.

I declined to participate in the pilot project for the new computers in our constituency offices. When I asked if I could install whatever I needed to on my computers—which I could do on the old ones—

they said no. This is more of a request than a question, but it would be very helpful if you could have a much more efficient process for approving software for our computers. There's an awful lot of software that we might want to use that isn't on your very narrow list of proprietary, not-very-secure software that is nominally secure. All the Windows stuff is proprietary, and there is no way of doing proper security oversight.

Meanwhile, there are open-source solutions that are much more secure and much more affordable. I'd like you to look at that. Thank you.

Hon. Geoff Regan: It's interesting that many of us use the Windows system on computers along with iPads or iPhones and the iOS. In those cases, there is a firewall between the two sides—the House side and the other side of that. You can put on other things, other apps and so forth. It's an interesting distinction between the two systems. It seems to me more difficult to manage that within the Windows environment, which works well in many ways.

That's not really an answer, but it's an observation.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Technological security is a whole field in itself. It could be quite a long discussion.

The Chair: We'll suspend for a few seconds while we go in camera.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

• (1145)

(Pause)

• (1155)

[Public proceedings resume]

The Chair: Shall vote 1 under the House of Commons in the interim estimates carry?

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Vote 1—Program expenditures.....\$87,453,121

(Vote 1 agreed to on division)

The Chair: Shall vote 1 under Parliamentary Protective Service in the interim estimates carry?

PARLIAMENTARY PROTECTIVE SERVICE

Vote 1—Program expenditures.....\$27,262,216

(Vote 1 agreed to on division)

The Chair: Thank you very much. We appreciate your coming again. I'm sure we'll see you again when we get to the main estimates.

We'll suspend while we change witnesses.

• (1155)

(Pause)

• (1205)

The Chair: Good afternoon, Minister.

Good afternoon and welcome back to the 142nd meeting of the committee.

As we consider the votes in estimates under the Leaders' Debates Commission, we are joined by the Honourable Karina Gould, Minister of Democratic Institutions. She is accompanied by the following officials from the Privy Council Office: Allen Sutherland, assistant secretary to the cabinet, machinery of government; and Matthew Shea, assistant deputy minister, corporate services.

Thank you for making yourselves available today. I will now turn the floor over to you, Minister, for your opening statement.

Hon. Karina Gould (Minister of Democratic Institutions): Thank you very much, Chair, and thank you to the committee.

I am pleased to be here today to discuss with you the supplementary estimates (B), 2018-19, and the interim estimates 2019-20 for the Leaders' Debates Commission.

I am pleased to be joined by my officials. As you mentioned, they are Al Sutherland, assistant secretary to the cabinet, machinery of government and democratic institutions; and Matthew Shea, assistant deputy minister of corporate services.

[*Translation*]

Leaders' debates play an essential role in Canadian democracy. Indeed, this is a key moment in the election campaigns. They provide voters with a unique opportunity to observe the personalities and ideas of the leaders seeking to become the Prime Minister of Canada on the same stage.

[*English*]

It is important that we realize that leaders' debates are much more than just media events. They're a fundamental exercise in democracy. As such, they may be organized in a way that is open and transparent and puts the public interest first. They must also be entrenched as a public good that Canadians can count on in each and every election to help inform their voting decisions.

[*Translation*]

Traditionally, leaders' debates in Canada were organized and funded by a consortium of major broadcasters, including CBC/Radio-Canada, Global, CTV and TVA. The consortium held private negotiations with political parties regarding dates, participation and format of the debates.

[*English*]

The closed-door nature of debate negotiations has been the subject of criticism for many years. Moreover, there were no consistent, clearly defined participation criteria applied in the 2015 debates, with some leaders participating in all the debates, while others participated only in a few.

[*Translation*]

The accessibility of the debates was also limited. For instance, we had debates in French that were not accessible to some francophone communities.

[*English*]

In response, as Minister of Democratic Institutions, I was asked to bring forward options to establish an independent commissioner to organize leaders' debates during future federal election campaigns, which was reaffirmed through a budget 2018 commitment for \$5.5

million over two years, recurring each election cycle, to support a new process that would ensure that leaders' debates are organized in the public interest.

[*Translation*]

Our government sought input from Canadians through an online consultation and a series of round tables involving representatives from the media, academia and public interest groups.

I also welcomed the committee's study launched in November 2017, in which it heard from 34 witnesses, myself included, during eight meetings. The committee also received written comments from political parties and stakeholders.

[*English*]

The vast majority of stakeholders expressed that leaders' debates make an essential contribution to the health of Canadian democracy. There is broad support for and value in the creation of a debates commission that is guided by the public interest, and there is a need for open and transparent information on the organization of the debates and especially the debate participation criteria.

Stakeholders also expressed that the permanent debates commission needs to be built to last, and that it is important to get it right. During my November 2017 appearance before PROC, I outlined a series of guiding principles that would inform the government's policy development for the leaders' debates commission: independence and impartiality, credibility, democratic citizenship, civic education and inclusion.

● (1210)

[*Translation*]

The commission exercises its independence and impartiality in carrying out its responsibilities and any associated expenses. The commissioner has the independence to determine how best to spend the allocated funds, while maintaining the funding envelope of \$5.5 billion over two years.

[*English*]

As identified in the estimates, the commission has started to use these funds for items such as salary, including the hiring of an executive director. Additional costs are expected for the contracting of a production entity, the operation of the commissioner's advisory board, awareness-raising and engagement with Canadians, and administrative costs.

During his appearance before PROC on November 6, 2018, the debates commissioner, the Right Honourable David Johnston, stated that it would be his intention and duty to use funding in a responsible manner and that he would seek every opportunity to reduce costs while also recognizing the need to make debates available to the largest possible audience.

The commission will continue to be fully independent and impartial as it prepares to execute its primary mandate to organize two leaders' debates, one in each official language, for the 2019 general election.

[Translation]

The commission is headed by a commissioner and supported by a seven-member advisory board. It is expected to be fully operational by spring 2019. Following the 2019 general election and no later than March 31, 2020, the commission will be mandated to submit a report to Parliament outlining findings and recommendations to inform the possible creation of a permanent commission.

[English]

I am confident the proposed approach will ensure that two informative, high-quality, engaging leaders' debates are broadcast on TV and on other platforms in 2019.

In conclusion, I would reiterate that leaders' debates are a public good. The commission will help ensure that the interests of Canadians are central to how leaders' debates are organized and broadcast. I look forward to hearing your feedback and welcome your questions.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. David Christopherson: I'm just curious, Mr. Chair, to know if there's a particular reason the minister didn't give us the courtesy of a copy of her remarks, as is customary.

Hon. Karina Gould: I apologize. There is no reason, and I'd be happy to share them with you. I will check with my staff as to what happened.

Mr. David Christopherson: They should have known.

Hon. Karina Gould: Yes, I apologize.

Mr. David Christopherson: Thank you.

The Chair: We'll start with Madam Lapointe.

[Translation]

Ms. Linda Lapointe: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would like to welcome you, Ms. Gould, and thank you for being here.

I listened carefully to your presentation. One of the responsibilities of the Leaders' Debates Commissioner is "engaging with Canadians to raise awareness about debates".

In terms of official languages, you said that we must reach everyone, no matter where they are in the country. Could you give us more details on that? How will you reach all Canadians, including linguistic minorities, no matter where they are across all provinces?

The commission is also mandated to provide "free of charge, the feed for the debates" that it organizes.

I am a mother of four children. They are now grown and live in homes where they don't have access to cable.

How will you reach people in similar situations and ensure that they are informed of the debates? How could they get free access to these debates?

Hon. Karina Gould: Thank you, Ms. Lapointe.

I would like to emphasize the commissioner's independence in terms of decision-making and action. For our part, we have ensured

that he has the necessary resources to enable him to assume his responsibilities, based on his own methods.

Our goal is to ensure that all Canadians, wherever they are in the country, have access to debates in both official languages.

For example, during the consultations, representatives of a francophone community in Nova Scotia stated that they were unable to access the leaders' debates. So we have added the issue of accessibility to the commissioner's mandate.

We have heard about another important fact across the country. Many of the new generation of adults and voters don't have access to cable. They don't watch TV in the traditional way.

Therefore, the commissioner's mandate is also to ensure that debates are available in a variety of formats and on a variety of platforms: not only through traditional media, but also on social media, on the platforms of digital giants and on the Internet in general.

Canadians will have access to the feed for debates in a format that suits them.

● (1215)

Ms. Linda Lapointe: Do you have anything to add, Mr. Sutherland?

Mr. Allen Sutherland (Assistant Secretary to the Cabinet, Machinery of Government, Privy Council Office): I fully agree.

Ms. Linda Lapointe: Thank you.

In my opinion, it's very important to circulate information about the availability of debates. That was just for context.

Earlier, you mentioned the commissioner's independence in decision-making and the methods to be adopted. You also mentioned that he and his team would be on the job in spring 2019.

Do you think he will be able to count on all the staff he needs to train his team and fulfill his mandate?

Hon. Karina Gould: As I said earlier, we have ensured that the commissioner has the necessary resources, but I am not aware of Mr. Johnston's activities because the commission must remain independent.

Mr. Johnston is extremely competent, and I am convinced that he is currently working very hard to get his team together, a task that is entirely his responsibility, to fulfill his mandate.

I have full confidence in Mr. Johnston, and I am certain that he will do an excellent job.

Ms. Linda Lapointe: There is the commissioner who will organize the debates, but can you suggest other ways we could strengthen our democracy?

Hon. Karina Gould: Do you mean ways to strengthen our democracy in general?

● (1220)

Ms. Linda Lapointe: Yes. How can we go even further?

Hon. Karina Gould: The creation of the Leaders' Debates Commissioner position is a very important initiative. These debates are key moments for people because they can see how leaders interact spontaneously and know what they think.

There are many things we could do to strengthen our democracy. The announcement we made two or three weeks ago is also important. It relates to protecting our democracy from cyber threats and threats from abroad. We must talk about our democratic system and ensure that people have the tools to be well-informed and know where the information comes from. It's important.

Together with the Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness and the Minister of National Defence, I also announced an investment of \$7 million in digital, media and civic education programs. In a more digital world, this is important. We know that a lot of information is circulating on the Internet and digital platforms. People must have the necessary tools to know what to believe and what not to believe.

The study of Bill C-76 conducted by this committee was very important to ensure transparency in political advertising.

Ms. Linda Lapointe: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you.

We will now go to Mr. Nater.

[English]

Mr. John Nater (Perth—Wellington, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Minister, for joining us today. Actually, I want to begin by thanking you as well for your service as Minister of Democratic Institutions. I understand that you won't be seeking re-election this fall in Burlington, so I wanted to thank you for your service to Burlington.

Hon. Karina Gould: No? Why not?

Mr. John Nater: Oh, it was just my assumption that you weren't. Since you are here defending an independent debates commissioner, it was my assumption that somehow you've removed yourself from the partisan process. I suppose that's not the case, then.

Hon. Karina Gould: I am here because I'm the Minister of Democratic Institutions and you invited me to come, and because the debates commission is supported through PCO. That's why I'm here, because of your invitation, but it is absolutely an independent process.

I am very much looking forward to seeking re-election and serving the good people of Burlington in 2019 and beyond. Thank you for the opportunity for me to mention my amazing constituents and how proud I am to serve them.

Mr. John Nater: It is a great riding, Burlington. I have been there several times.

Mr. David Christopherson: The whole neighbourhood is great.

Mr. John Nater: The whole greater Hamilton area—

Hon. Karina Gould: That's true. The bay is a good community.

Mr. John Nater: You mentioned in your opening comments that an executive director had been hired. Could you inform the committee who that is?

Hon. Karina Gould: The executive director who has been hired is Michel Cormier, formerly of Radio-Canada.

Mr. John Nater: What pay level will they be at? Are they at a deputy minister level, or an assistant deputy minister level?

Mr. Matthew Shea (Assistant Deputy Minister, Corporate Services, Privy Council Office): I could get back to the committee on the pay level. I'm not sure. They would not be at a deputy head level. The commissioner is in that type of role. They would likely be an executive, somewhere between EX-02 and EX-04.

Mr. John Nater: Yes, could you provide that to the committee?

Was it Michel Cormier? Would he be a full-time member or will it just be on a contract? How long will that person serve in that role?

Mr. Matthew Shea: I don't have that level of information.

This is a good opportunity to remind the committee that they are independent, so we don't get overly involved in their HR or their finance. We just make sure their bills are paid and they have HR support, but we don't really get into that level of detail, and we make it a point to not get overly involved in that level of detail.

Mr. John Nater: Has PCO or your minister's office had any consultations with Mr. Johnston on potential appointees to the seven-person advisory board? Have any names been provided—either to your office, Minister, or to PCO—on potential appointees to that panel?

Hon. Karina Gould: The only thing I would be aware of—just like the rest of the public—is all of the individuals who participated in the round table, but that's not something that has been provided. That's just public information.

Mr. John Nater: Will those members be appointed via order in council?

Mr. Matthew Shea: They will be hired as per diem appointees under professional services.

Mr. John Nater: Has PCO or the minister's office had any consultations with the major broadcasters or the social media companies—Facebook, Twitter—on the potential distribution of this leaders' debate?

Hon. Karina Gould: Only as part of the round table discussions that happened last spring....

Mr. John Nater: So there have been no efforts by any of these groups to lobby either PCO or your minister's office on the outcome of this. Would the chair, the commissioner, be subject to the overview by the Commissioner of Lobbying in terms of the reporting of lobbying having been undertaken in regard to either the commissioner or the executive director? Would lobbyists have to report any of those interactions?

Mr. Matthew Shea: I can confirm that for lobbying they have the same obligations for reporting that any department does. They're set up as a separate department, so they have full reporting obligations, like any other deputy head across the government.

Mr. John Nater: Thank you, Chair. I believe Mrs. Kusie will take the remaining time.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie (Calgary Midnapore, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Nater.

Thank you very much, Minister, for being here today.

I know that something that has been of great importance to you has been to have participation in this process from all the other political parties. Could you please expand on what consultation process has taken place to this point with the other political parties to further this process?

Hon. Karina Gould: Since the appointment of the commissioner...?

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: That's correct.

Hon. Karina Gould: My office has not been involved since the appointment of the commissioner. The commissioner is responsible for his work since being appointed.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Okay. I have to say that this is the second time you have mentioned this. You mentioned it within your opening statement as well, and my colleague did make a remark, a joke, to open up, but I don't believe that independence can be used as an excuse for not having knowledge of the process and not being able to share information with this committee in regard to the process. I guess I would just ask you to please consider that for future visits here.

• (1225)

Hon. Karina Gould: That's your point of view, but I think that actually independence means independence, so that means the minister is not directing or involved in the commissioner's ability to make those decisions. I really do believe in the definition of independence, so we have not been involved whatsoever, but I'm happy to be here to answer the questions to the best of my ability.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Sure. My point of view would be that the purpose of your being here, Minister, is to provide the committee with a fulsome update, and when you tell us that you do not have the information.... I'm not sure if your colleagues who are here with you today can provide further information on that. That is what we expect as the opposition and as the committee. We expect to have that information in some capacity or another.

My colleague touched briefly upon the seven-person advisory panel. The public information you mentioned is the only information that has been provided so far in regard to appointees to this panel. Can you elaborate further on whether one of the individuals will be from the PCO and who that might be?

Hon. Karina Gould: On the independent advisory panel...?

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Yes.

Hon. Karina Gould: As I said, it's up to the commissioner to make a decision as to who they are, and I do not have knowledge of whom he is thinking about at this time.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Okay.

My colleague also made reference to some of the costs. When the debates commission was announced, it was also publicized that it would be given a budget of \$5.5 million for the two debates.

Again, since it is the government that is responsible for dispensing these funds, have you been given any information in regard to a

budget or an itemized budget? Again, being that as a committee we are here discussing the estimates, I feel that we have the privilege and the obligation to review the expenditures. If you could provide any additional information in regard to a budget, as specific as possible, we would appreciate that information.

Mr. Matthew Shea: I'll handle that.

I would maybe just take you back to when that \$5.5-million figure was come up with.... That was a best estimate, and that was an "up to" amount. I think the debates commissioner has made it clear that his goal is to actually live below that budget. Any interactions I've had with him from an internal service perspective have certainly been along that line.

I can tell you that probably in the realm of \$900,000 to a million of that will be salaries, with the lion's share being for other operating...for things such as professional services, which will include the advisory committee, advertising services and communications services. There will likely be a large contract that would be related to actually holding the two debates. That's where the lion's share of the costs will be.

The debates commissioner's office has made it clear they're still finalizing that exact budget, but that's what our \$5.5-million estimate was based on, and I think it won't be far off that. From an overall split, there may be differences between what they spend on professional services versus advertising, but I think the salaries I mentioned are pretty bang on.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you, Mrs. Kusie.

Mr. Christopherson.

Mr. David Christopherson: Thank you, Chair.

Minister, thank you very much for being here. Starting on a positive, let me just say how impressed I am that not once in the entire term since you've been a minister have you played games, jerked us around, or dodged any invitation to come here, no matter how difficult the subject. That's appreciated and respected.

Having said that, we're on that file again. I just need to make a statement and then I'll move on.

Again, the undemocratic nature of the democratic reform ministry still takes my breath away. It's still not acceptable.... Well, I should say it is acceptable, because we have no choice, but it's not warmly accepted that the government unilaterally appointed someone who plays such a key role in our democracy. It leaves open the argument, for those who didn't want the leaders' debates commission, to have a legitimate broadside. Again, the lack of respect for the commitment of this government to independent committees and the importance of committees in the main.... In large part, it's just been talk, talk, talk. We haven't seen the walk, walk, walk.

Having said all of that, I accept the rule of Parliament, which decided that this is now in place, so we'll move forward. We'll deal with any changing after the fact. I will speak to that a bit in terms of accountability, but we do accept that this is now in place.

I have to tell you that on a personal basis, the only thing that saved the day for you was the integrity of the person you picked. I mean, that papered up a lot of the cracks in the walls, but those cracks are there. The election's coming, and you folks are going to have to wear it on these things.

Having said that, I will move on. In terms of the members, I respect the independence you're alluding to. By the sounds of it, I believe that's being respected, but at what point does independence meet accountability? What exactly is the vehicle, as you see it, given that there's no guarantee who the government is next time? How do you see it right now in terms of the accountability back to this committee or some other entity? Having given people all this independence, all this power and all this money, what's the accountability? As well, will that include a detailed budget next time, rather than just a macro number?

• (1230)

Hon. Karina Gould: Thank you for those questions.

Perhaps I can first put this on the record. I know that my colleague is not seeking re-election next time, and I don't know if I'll have another chance. I know I'm always welcome to come back to the committee, and I know you'll invite me back, but I'd like to say now how much of a pleasure it's been to work with my colleague Mr. Christopherson. I think Parliament will be missing him next time around, because he does serve with a lot of integrity.

Mr. David Christopherson: You're very kind. Thank you.

Hon. Karina Gould: It's not just because you're my neighbour—

Mr. David Christopherson: It helps.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Hon. Karina Gould: It does help, but I have a lot of admiration for you.

At any rate, if I can just get that on the record, I'm glad to say that.

Mr. David Christopherson: Thank you.

Hon. Karina Gould: With regard to accountability, I think that's a really important question. It was something we did try to build into the process with regard to the debates commissioner coming back to this committee within six months of the election—or I guess a bit less, with March 2020—to talk about how things went and to provide an update and the plans moving forward. I was—

Mr. David Christopherson: Sorry, is that including a detailed budget?

Hon. Karina Gould: I don't know if it said “detailed budget” in it.

Mr. Allen Sutherland: As per the OIC, the debates commissioner is required to provide a report on an in-depth analysis of the experience of the 2019 debates, the organization of the debates, and advice for the future form of a leaders' debates commission. That report is to be tabled in Parliament.

Hon. Karina Gould: I do think, though, that with regard to the next estimates, that's something that could be explored definitely by this committee. I also think that one thing the committee... Of course, you make your own decisions, but I think one thing that should be asked is whether the budget that was in place for 2019 was sufficient, or too great, or whatever the experience was.

I would imagine that the debates commissioner, when he tables that report—and he would ultimately like, I believe, to come back to Parliament—will have suggestions in terms of how a budget could be allocated, given our experience this time. This is the first one. We're hoping we're providing sufficient resources to be able to deliver on the mandate. I think the experience of this first time will serve greatly in terms of a more built-to-last model.

Mr. David Christopherson: Thank you.

The advisory board is obviously key. Are you aware—or is it public—what the criteria are for acceptance, and is it the intention of the commissioner to make public the names of these members as they are appointed?

Hon. Karina Gould: Yes. The original order in council document, under “Advisory Board”, section 8(2), reads:

The Advisory Board is to be composed of seven members, and its composition is to be reflective of gender balance and Canadian diversity and is to represent a range of political affiliations and expertise.

With regard to a specific job description, that would be up to the commissioner to decide, and it would be his responsibility to publicize the names of these individuals.

Mr. David Christopherson: Will that be in a timely fashion? Will they be appointed one at a time, or as a lump appointment? How would that work?

Hon. Karina Gould: Again, that would be a question that the commissioner would have to answer. Our understanding is that we can anticipate it in the spring of 2019.

Mr. David Christopherson: Going forward, what is the relationship between you and the commissioner, given the sensitivity around election debates? There has to be a reporting mechanism, so there is something. I assume you're respecting independence.

How is that going to work?

• (1235)

Hon. Karina Gould: Yes, I am respecting independence.

Essentially, since his appointment we have not had a conversation and we do not intend to have one. The accountability, of course, will be through the budgetary process, and PCO is providing back-office support. But in terms of the decisions that are being made, we've provided the broad outline, the expected objectives, and it's up to the commissioner to deliver those.

Mr. David Christopherson: Okay, that's great. Thanks very much, Minister, I appreciate it.

Thank you, Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Christopherson.

We'll go to Mr. Bittle.

Mr. Chris Bittle: Thank you so much, Minister, for being here. I hope you're feeling well and that you will feel better soon. As a fellow parent of a toddler, I know that they touch everything, and that does not necessarily assist with parental health. Thank you so much for being here anyway.

I know the answer to my question will likely be that Mr. Johnston will be responsible for this. It's something that really touched me during our study. As able-bodied individuals, we don't think about persons with disabilities and how they access debates. I was wondering if you could comment on that, the framework and what you've heard on that subject.

Hon. Karina Gould: Certainly. It's a good thing I'm this far away from all of you. Hopefully, you won't catch the day care plague.

We heard a lot about accessibility during the consultations, particularly in terms of those who are hearing or vision impaired. One of the interesting conversations we had during the consultations was with an advocacy group for the vision impaired. They were talking about making the soundtrack of the debates available, having it broadcast on the radio or in podcast style, that it would be very interesting for them. They also talked about ensuring there is sign-language interpretation during the broadcast. Of course, this is all in the report, which the debates commissioner has access to, but one of the mandates is really to make sure the feed is accessible to people of all abilities.

The other interesting thing that came up was with regard to making the feed available in different languages. Obviously, with regard to our two official languages, we make sure we have a main debate in English and a main debate in French, but there is also the possibility to work with groups of diverse backgrounds to make sure that people whose first language is not English or French can also access the debates.

I think it's a really important question, one that I know the commissioner is seized with. Accessibility has always been a passion of his, so I have confidence that he will be able to deliver that.

Mr. Chris Bittle: I'm going to switch gears—probably dramatically.

Hon. Karina Gould: Okay.

Mr. Chris Bittle: I saw on the news that a report came out in Australia—I believe it was announced by the prime minister—that major political parties had been hacked by a “sophisticated foreign actor”. As we head into an election, I know this is something about which concern has been raised by all parties and all members around the table.

How do you see things as we move forward in an election year? There are nations out there that seek to cause harm, sow doubt, and are willing to act against the democracies of our allies. We've seen that in Britain. We've seen it in the United States. We've now seen it in Australia, and we're up next.

Could you comment on that?

Hon. Karina Gould: I think this is an extremely important topic. It goes to show that you can't be too careful in this space. I'm very pleased that we have had a very productive working relationship on this with all of the main political parties represented in the House of Commons. They've been engaged with the Communications Security Establishment, and CSE is there to provide advice. We've had some really good conversations about protecting our democracy writ large. I have to say that, at least until now, people and parties have put partisanship aside in this specific area and have been focusing on ensuring that we're protecting Canada first.

That's been very positive. The Australian example goes to show that we have to take this seriously here in Canada. One of the things I announced during the protecting democracy announcement on January 30 was the fact that we will be extending security clearance to all political leaders represented in the House of Commons, and also to up to four of their aides and advisers, so that they can be briefed and up to speed. Ultimately, this is a Canada-first policy.

We're prepared. We obviously can't protect against every eventuality, but I have been really encouraged by the fact that so far everyone is working together on this file.

• (1240)

Mr. Chris Bittle: We had Facebook and Twitter before our committee in regard to Bill C-76. We raked them over the coals a bit, but my worry is that they said, “Oh, don't worry. We'll be good. We'll have things in place, maybe, possibly, hopefully, possibly, maybe in the future sometime, maybe.”

Have you had any discussions with the social media companies as we're moving forward to the election?

Hon. Karina Gould: Yes, I've had conversations with both Facebook and Twitter. I'm going to be meeting with Microsoft this week and hopefully Google in the coming weeks as well.

I think Canadians are rightly concerned. They are rightly feeling uneasy about the role of social media in our upcoming election. It's going to play an even bigger role than it did in 2015. While there have been some positive steps taken by the platforms to deal with fake accounts and inauthentic behaviour, particularly from foreign sources, there is a lot more that can and should be done. We're having conversations to that effect.

One thing that's interesting to me is that all the major platforms have signed on to a code of practice for the upcoming EU parliamentary elections in May. We're following that very closely and trying to determine if that's something that would be both effective and worthwhile to bring here.

One of the biggest challenges with regard to social media companies is precisely that accountability factor, in that, at the moment, they are saying, “Just trust us. We're doing things.” But we don't necessarily have the mechanisms to be sure that they are, apart from the items that were passed in Bill C-76 with regard to ad transparency and not knowingly accepting foreign funding on platforms for political advertisement.

This issue is one that continues to evolve, and we continue to learn a lot about it. We need to be certain that the companies are acting in good faith and taking this issue seriously. We are ensuring that the loopholes that have existed are now closed, understanding that our adversaries are always evolving as well.

Mr. Chris Bittle: Thank you, Minister.

The Chair: Mrs. Kusie.

[Translation]

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: I would first like to address a point that Ms. Lapointe raised earlier.

[English]

Facebook recently announced there are three online video channels in the U.S. that are watched by billions of millennials. In fact, these are backed by the Russian government. More appropriate to this conversation, and to Canada, is the recent CBC story regarding the number of tweets put out by foreign trolls. In fact, 9.6 million tweets were put out, and they are having a significant impact not only on our debates' processes, our electoral processes, but also very significantly on our democratic processes. In fact, these tweets have been shown to influence such things as thoughts in Canada on both immigration and pipeline approval.

I am wondering what you are doing, what your government is doing, in regard to foreign interference and influence that goes beyond our electoral processes to our democratic processes.

• (1245)

Hon. Karina Gould: It's a very interesting question, actually, and one that I would welcome the committee looking into as well, because I think it's very important. It's one where there are a lot of grey areas. It's not a grey area when you know it's coming from a foreign source. That's not something we want. I always talk about the overt and covert influence campaigns. There's overt influence, which is diplomacy, essentially, trying to achieve a certain outcome, and all countries in the world participate in that. Then there's covert influence, where you're perhaps posing as a Canadian or as an organization that's Canadian, but you are really funded from elsewhere. Knowing about that can be quite challenging and difficult. I think that's something we saw in the lead-up to the 2016 presidential election. This was something very new that we hadn't really seen before, although foreign interference has always existed. It's just existing in different channels now.

We want to ensure that we're providing space for legitimate debate in Canada. There are ongoing issues, particularly when there isn't an election. That was very much part of my thinking with regard to third party advertising during the pre-writ period and not doing it before then, because while Parliament is in session, you want to ensure that Canadians can be in a sense unfettered in their ability to interact with parliamentarians and to raise and discuss important issues.

The question—and the tricky zone—is, how do you know where that initial information is coming from? I think civic media and digital literacy are really important to help Canadians inform themselves of what kinds of markers to look for in terms of where information is coming from. If you're seeing a Twitter account that maybe has only 15 followers but is tweeting non-stop on a whole range of issues that are kind of weird, then maybe that's not a legitimate account. Maybe that's coming from somewhere else. It's those kinds of conversations that we need to get started on.

Twitter and Facebook have been taking down accounts, millions of fake accounts, that they can confirm are coming from foreign sources and posing as domestic actors.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Minister, my apologies. I'll have to interrupt you there.

I agree, and I've often said that it's like radiation or free radicals: You know it's out there, but you certainly can't see it. I'm just concerned. In the U.S., we've seen the establishment of the Global Engagement Center, which is in charge of looking for fake information. As well, U.K. lawmakers recently put forward the necessity of “a compulsory code of ethics”, so this is obviously something that's of importance to the committee.

With that, Mr. Chair, I would like to put forward the following motion on notice:

That the Minister of Democratic Institutions be invited to appear before the Committee to discuss the government's plan to safeguard the 2019 election and the Security and Intelligence Threats to Elections Task Force.

The minister has already welcomingly stated she would be happy to return.

The Chair: Thank you.

That's good. That's your time as well.

Mr. Hardie.

Mr. Ken Hardie (Fleetwood—Port Kells, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I have a concern. It relates to a story that I heard directly from Marshall McLuhan, which means it was a long time ago. It was a story about an attempt by the Russian government to modernize and lighten up. They started a big nightclub in Moscow, which failed after about six months. They had a big commission looking into it. Somebody asked, “Well, was it the booze?” “Oh—the best stuff.” “The food?” “Fantastic.” “What about the chorus line?” “Everyone a good party member since 1917.”

So, do we have confidence that Commissioner Johnston is going to glue together something that will actually resonate with Canadians, the ones we're actually trying to serve here? Do we have any oversight of this at all, or have we just basically told the commissioner to go forth without any kind of leadership? Are there broadcasters in his group? I'm not talking about Mr. Cormier, because Mr. Cormier sounds like senior management who probably never saw the business end of a camera. I'm talking about people who actually have the skills and demonstrated ability to present a program that engages the public.

• (1250)

Hon. Karina Gould: I have a lot of confidence in Mr. Johnston to hire the right people for this. I think his storied career speaks to his passion for the public interest, but also his most recent experience as Governor General has enabled him to engage with such a diverse cross-section of Canadians that I really feel he will understand and appreciate how to ensure that these debates are put together and accessible to as broad a range of Canadians and interests as possible.

I also think that the public report from the consultations that we did with the IRPP really emphasizes the need to make sure that there are skilled and qualified people on his team. I have every confidence that he will do that. The OIC does lay out important principles and a guiding mandate for him. I have full confidence that he'll be able to deliver that.

I'm going to turn it over to Matt with regard to the specifics.

Mr. Ken Hardie: Be very brief, please, because I have another question.

Hon. Karina Gould: Okay, sure.

Mr. Matthew Shea: Well, maybe I can just touch really quickly on the accountability. I've heard mention a couple of times of accountability and detailed budget plans. I just want to be clear that the debates commission, like any department, will have to come forward with a departmental plan, which gets tabled in Parliament. It has to go forward to main estimates, which get tabled in Parliament, and in both—

Mr. Ken Hardie: No, I understand. That's all financial accountability. I'm just talking about putting on a program that Canadians will want to watch and be engaged in. In all the debates I've witnessed, since black and white television and just banging rocks together, we've never, in fact, come up with a format that has really seemed to work. In some cases, it's a big cat fight between the various candidates. In others, you have journalists operating from their echo chambers trying to suppose what's interesting to the public.

Have we actually received any leadership or inclination from the public about what they would like to see covered and how they would like to see it covered?

Hon. Karina Gould: I think your question gets to the point of why we've put forward a debates commission in the first place, because over the past decades, and particularly in recent history, it's been a political exercise, a partisan exercise, or a strictly journalistic exercise. The key point here that I think is important in his mandate is that they are to be done in the public interest.

I think Mr. Johnston is uniquely positioned to be able to draw on experts in broadcasting, academia and civil society to really ensure that the product that will be delivered is one that speaks to Canadians. That's one of the things we heard time and time again through our round tables and conversations across the country, to do exactly what you're talking about—put together a product that will be interesting for Canadians, that Canadians will want to engage with, but also one that can be used freely, which I think is really the most important part of it. The feed should be made available to whoever wants to use it, because then they can share it on diverse platforms or use different parts. I'm just speculating here, but let's say there's a group that's interested in the environment and climate change. If there's a question on the environment and climate change, that's something they can focus on.

I'm a bit of a political geek myself, but I think this is really exciting.

The Chair: Thank you.

David, you have a short question.

Mr. David Christopherson: Thanks, Chair. I appreciate that.

The Chief Electoral Officer has.... There's a technical term and I don't know it. What it means is that his budget is unlimited. Once he gets into running an election, he can access the funding he needs. Would the debates commissioner have the same thing, given the fact that there's an artificial number? If he runs into a wall in terms of expenses, what happens?

●(1255)

Mr. Matthew Shea: It is a set amount, approved by Parliament. If the debates commissioner were to run into a wall—and they've given no indication—there would be a process as with any department, whereby the debates commissioner would put in a funding request to the minister and it would go from there. Again, there has been no indication that they feel they don't have enough money, but if they did, there are mechanisms.

Mr. David Christopherson: It could happen quickly, just a paper thing.

Mr. Matthew Shea: Absolutely. I'll finish what I started to say earlier. The reason I was mentioning the departmental plan and main estimates is that when they're tabled, this committee has the opportunity to call the debates commissioner. Unlike PCO, where we're limited in what we can say, he could go into details about exactly how he plans to spend, if he has enough money—all those questions that I think you're asking.

Mr. David Christopherson: Thank you.

Thank you, Chair, for your indulgence.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mrs. Kusie.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Thank you, Chair.

Mr. Bittle touched on raking over the coals. I'm not sure that's what we ended up doing, and I certainly don't feel that's what we ended up doing for the Canadian public with Bill C-76. I'm hearing from you and the government that you want to make a real commitment to protecting Canadians and our electoral processes from foreign interference and influence. But all we got out of Bill C-76 was an interference process where there's a tap on the hand if there is foreign funding. Again, we tried as Conservatives to legislate amendments that would make it impossible for this to happen, with segregated bank accounts and doing more than the tap on the hand.

In addition, with the platforms, all we ended up with was some lame registries. It concerns me very much. In addition, frankly, when you go to the mainstream media, Minister... When you went on *The West Block*, you said that you expect social media platforms to do more to protect the 2019 federal election from foreign interference, and you asked them to take lessons learned from around the world and apply them in Canada. It is very disturbing to me that you are asking corporations, of their own goodwill, to try to protect Canadians and our electoral processes, rather than taking responsibility yourself, both as the minister and the government.

Given the weak outcomes of Bill C-76 and your comments in the media, can you please provide any more assurance to the committee here today and to all Canadians that the 2019 election will have the most assurances possible to be kept safe from foreign influence?

Hon. Karina Gould: I actually think that Bill C-76 was a good example of taking suggestions from all the different political parties represented around the table, particularly with regard to the ad registry and many of the items relating to third parties. Several of the suggestions and recommendations taken were put forward by the Conservatives and the NDP. Actually, a number of them were put forward by all of the political parties. That's really a testament to parliamentary democracy.

I would encourage this committee to do a study of the role of social media and democracy, if that's something you think is interesting, to hold the social media companies to account. I would welcome suggestions and feedback in terms of how to appropriately regulate or legislate that behaviour. One of the biggest challenges—and you can see this around the world—is that the path forward is not clear. This is something Canadians would certainly appreciate.

Maybe it was Mr. Bittle who mentioned.... Actually, no, there was a study that came out today saying that six in 10 Canadians don't feel good about Facebook and the upcoming election. This is another example of where we can work together, put partisanship aside and come up with the appropriate path forward. We want to ensure that we are providing the important public space that social media provides for people to express themselves, but also mitigating some of the negative impacts that can arise through social media. This would be something very interesting for the committee to work on, if you chose to do that. I'm also happy to speak with any of you individually about ideas or thoughts that you have.

The program that we put forward on January 30 with regard to protecting our democracy is quite comprehensive and tries to tackle the issue from many different sides to provide Canadians with the assurance that the government is taking this seriously. We're looking at it from both a hard and a soft angle.

Ultimately, we have to work together as Canadians. The ultimate target for our democracy is the Canadian voter, because Canadian voters are the ones who hold the power in terms of the votes they cast. What we need to do—both I and the government but also parliamentarians—is to ensure that Canadians have the information they need to make informed choices.

• (1300)

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Thank you, Minister.

As a former foreign service officer and security officer, I would just counsel you to get as much information as you can from your counterparts. As a member of this committee, I hope that you would share it with us.

Thank you.

Hon. Karina Gould: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mrs. Kusie.

We'll now go to vote 1b under the Leaders' Debates Commission in supplementary estimates (B).

LEADERS' DEBATES COMMISSION

Vote 1b—Program expenditures.....\$257,949

(Vote 1b agreed to on division)

The Chair: Shall vote 1 under the Leaders' Debates Commission in the interim estimates carry?

LEADERS' DEBATES COMMISSION

Vote 1—Program expenditures.....\$2,260,388

(Vote 1 agreed to on division)

The Chair: Shall I report the votes in supplementary estimates (B) and the interim estimates to the House?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Okay, thank you.

Thank you very much, Minister and your colleagues, for coming.

There is another committee coming here, but just before we break, I have two quick things. Maybe I'll read this. We're doing the two-House study, and normally the clerk tweets out something. Basically it says:

The Committee is studying whether it would be advantageous for the House of Commons to establish a parallel debating chamber. Parallel debating chambers can serve as additional forums for debate on certain kinds of parliamentary business and have been used by the Parliaments of Australia and the United Kingdom since the 1990s.

Is there any problem with that? Okay.

Thursday is our lunch. Hopefully you can all make it.

Next Tuesday, Bruce Stanton will be here from 11:00 to 12:00. From 12:00 to 1:00, we had the Subcommittee on Agenda and Procedure, but we talked about also doing the report on the privilege motion. In that hour, too, we'll discuss the final report, and the researcher will send that out.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: What day is that?

The Chair: That is next Tuesday.

Is everyone okay with that?

The meeting is adjourned.

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